

others without consideration, without justice, and without intelligent mercy, they violate the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal"?

The answer to that question, of course, is "yes," unless through miseducation, suppression of news and guileful propaganda, or just being dull, we have retrogressed to the ancient belief that the king can do no wrong.

2. Is there a point beyond which public officials cannot go in causing inflation through their fiscal, money, paternal, and foreign policies, their extravagances, subsi-

dies, gifts, and favoritisms, thus destroying substantial value in everyone's money and in the lifetime savings of industrious, thrifty, and exemplary citizens, without committing theft and without violating the elemental commandment of justice: "Thou shalt render to every person his due"?

3. What are the authoritative decisions of our government officials — legislative, judicial, and executive — doing to the once recognized rights of private ownership, and on what fateful course are we bent? ♦

THE PRESS and THE PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO KNOW

JOHN C. MERRILL

THE IDEA is prevalent today, at least among journalists, that the people of the United States have a *right* to know government business. Although there are various segments of our society, including many in the government apparatus, which seemingly do not endorse this "people's right to know,"

it has been generally accepted as a basic concept in our democratic Republic. If the people *rule* through their representatives, then it naturally follows that if they are to be well-informed, intelligent rulers, they must know what their government is doing. In this sense, "the people's right to know" is on solid theoretical ground.

What is rather disturbing about

the whole matter of the "people's right to know" is the idea that the government apparatus is solely — or largely — responsible for restricting this *right*. There is no doubt, of course, that government is secretive, is over-sensitive, and is restrictive of information. It is also clear that government "manages" the news, making sure certain releases are made at the right time to achieve a desired effect and de-emphasizing (or eliminating) certain other information about which it is not enthusiastic. Everyone who can read in this country should know about this government secrecy, sensitivity, and management. The mass media of communication, with a certain sensitivity of their own, periodically draw the public's attention to it.

The concept of "the people's right to know" has mainly been promoted since World War II; books such as Kent Cooper's *The Right to Know* and Harold Cross' *The People's Right to Know* and numerous articles have been printed declaring such a "right" and castigating government for infringing on it. No libertarian can but admire and applaud such anti-government broadsides, but the problem is much larger than this. And it cries out for a solution which is not so simplistic as blaming the government — or even "reforming" it.

Do People Care?

Two other important factors are involved in this business of letting the people know: the *people*, and the *press*. How often they are overlooked in a discussion of this area!

Quite frankly, the people either don't know they have such a right, or they don't take it seriously. It appears that they simply don't care. Such a right to know is certainly one of great importance — a civil right if there ever was one. But where is public concern? Where are the "demonstrations," the letters to congressmen — even the letters to newspapers and magazines? Why has not the Supreme Court, under popular pressure, dealt with this infringement of a civil right? Why, indeed, do not the citizens (the *people* who have this theoretical right) *insist* upon it?

The only segment of our society which seems really concerned about the *right* is the press — the editors and publishers chiefly. They criticize, agitate, and fret about the "people's right to know" being infringed on by government. In effect, they imply that government alone keeps the people from "knowing" government business. But this is not really true. What about the news media themselves? What are they doing in this respect? Any person familiar with the typical news operation must recognize

Dr. Merrill is Professor of Journalism at the University of Missouri.